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ABSTRACT

Online support groups provide an alternative vehicle of support for people in distress by linking people who have similar problems. They have the potential to improve the access and delivery of support to a wide range of people, including some who would not seek face-to-face support at all. Online support groups reduce the sense of isolation caused by geographic or physical/medical constraints and increase feelings of validation. However, they are not for everyone. This digest examines the following issues regarding online support groups: access; format; synchronous groups; asynchronous groups; and group leaders. Also discussed are the strengths of online support groups (increased access to support; adjunct to counseling; therapeutic factors; specialized online support groups; and privacy. Also discussed are the limitations of online support groups (differing stages of group development; limited feedback; crisis management; anonymity breaches; host competency; quality control; members with limited language skills; ethical and legal concerns; and hoax perpetuations). (MKA)

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ERIC CASS DIGEST

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Overview

Traditionally, people discuss emotionally distressing issues with someone they know, with someone in a similar situation, with a mental health professional or do not discuss the issue at all. Computer technology is now altering the traditional ways people handle stress. More people participate in online support groups on such thematic topics as alcoholism, eating disorders and depression which provide privacy from the comfort of home.

Online support groups can range from serving as one therapeutic component of a comprehensive mental health treatment plan to serving as the sole support system. They attract a broad variety of members who may previously have avoided peers and their traditional support system. Satisfied members report feeling validation and support while dissatisfied members express frustration caused by technology problems and by the absence of visual, auditory and interpersonal cues (Galinsky, Schopler & Abell, 1996).

Nuts And Bolts Of Online Support Groups

• **Access.** Online support groups can be accessed through use of a computer and modem in conjunction with an Internet service provider (ISP) such as America Online (AOL). Once connected through an ISP, online support groups may also be reached through Internet portals (e.g., Yahoo) or through specialized websites (e.g., www.onlinepsych.com or www.stresscenter.com).

• **Format.** Online support groups can function in real time (i.e., synchronous group) and through newsgroups (i.e., asynchronous groups):

• **Synchronous Groups.** Groups are interactive. Members correspond anonymously using text-based communication in real time. These groups use contrived screen names (i.e., pseudonyms), meet at a scheduled time to encourage consistent participation and convene for one hour on average. Limited expressions of emotions are conveyed symbolically by emoticons as illustrated in Gary and Remolino (2000).

• **Asynchronous Groups**. Members post messages and questions twenty-four hours in newsgroups to a specific member or to the general membership. This format allows members to send and retrieve messages at their convenience and regardless of their time zone.

• **Group Leader.** Groups are led by hosts who may be a mixture of mental health professionals and non-professionals, depending on the site. Hosts function as resource persons rather than online counselors. They use human relations skills to assist members in expressing feelings, disseminate information and make referrals to helplines, self-help resources, traditional support/self-help groups, local counseling centers, crisis centers, and hospice centers. They also recommend links to other online support groups, mental health web sites and fee-based cyber mental health services. An excerpt from a typical online support group session for loss issues can be found in Gary and Remolino (2000).

Strengths Of Online Support Groups

• **Increased Access to Support**. Online support groups reduce the sense of isolation for those who reside in underserved or remote locations, are housebound, need additional support between traditional support groups or counseling sessions, or seek anonymity. Internet access at a library, after-school program or community center enables a person with limited financial resources to participate as an equal member without financial resources becoming a barrier.

• **Adjunct to Counseling.** Online support groups can function as an effective therapeutic adjunct to counseling services for members who require more support than counseling offers and/or more frequent support than counseling provides. A member can join several free online support groups between counseling sessions and seek support without experiencing additional expenses.

• **Therapeutic Factors**. Members of online support groups benefit from Yalom's (1995) seven therapeutic factors. Through a combination of therapeutic factors, the potential for growth, change and social experimentation contribute to the group's cohesion and perceived helpfulness. For example, the factor of "universality" unites people as they share similar thoughts, feelings, fears and/or reactions with their cyber community. Others struggle too, and this is not always evident to people in distress.

• **Specialized Online Support Groups**. Specialized groups can connect people who need *someone* with whom they can communicate honestly and openly without regard to geographic boundaries. Groups dedicated to specific topics, age groups or gender groups can be formed.

• **Privacy**. Groups give members the privacy to seek support and information about behavior that might be perceived as a stigma and thereby become a barrier to seeking counseling and/or information. However, to ensure privacy, a member should minimize participation in an online support group at an employer's computer, during the lunch hour for example, because the employer may be legally entitled to monitor transmissions and computer activity (Hughes, 2000).

Limitations Of Online Support Groups

• **Differing Stages of Group Development**. Groups are open continuously to new membership. In addition to new members joining an established group, other online members may log on or log off at any time during a session. Such fluctuations in membership make it difficult for online groups to engage in the typical group phases of warm-up, action and closure or to maintain the working stage of group development for extended periods. This limitation reduces the efficacy of online support groups as a sole support source for some members.

• **Limited Feedback.** The lack of face-to-face contact obscures vocal intonations and verbal and non-verbal cues.

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including body language and expressions of emotion. Limited feedback may require changes in a member's habitual patterns of interaction and thinking in order to overcome this limitation. Dissatisfied members typically cite limited feedback as a disincentive to participate (Galinsky et al., 1996).

• **Crisis Management**. The successful resolution of an emotional crisis in cyberspace is challenging. Limited feedback and the lack of identifying information complicate the assessment and referral process.

• **Anonymity Breaches.** Steps are taken to maintain the anonymity of each member and the confidentiality of group dialogue. For example, the host discourages the exchange of *identifying* information and personal communication between members. However, anonymity can be breached. Members must consider the risk of a breach in anonymity before joining.

• **Host Competency**. Requirements for hosts vary among websites, portals and ISPs. Hosts should state their professional qualifications (or indicate none) at the beginning of each session, or during orientation, while not divulging their true identity.

• **Quality Control**. The quality of online support groups is inconsistent. Each sets its own standards and procedures. The new user should try several groups in search of the best fit.

• **Members with Limited Language Skills.** Members with an expressive or receptive learning disability or with language limitations (such as English as a second language) may be frustrated by the rapid pace and multiple dialogues, and consequently, may be frustrated by text-based communication. Furthermore, members may be challenged in communicating feelings and thoughts clearly to others. In a text-only format with limited interpersonal feedback, communicative misunderstandings are common for all members and this could be exacerbated for the member with limited language skills. We recommend software programs that convert spoken words to text and vice versa.

• **Ethical and Legal Concerns**. The hosting of and participation in online support groups raises some ethical and legal questions that currently remain unanswered. Currently, it is unclear if the online support group is considered a cyberspace mental health service. However, several mental health professional organizations and licensing boards have begun to grapple with cyberspace ethical and legal issues (Bloom, 1997).

• **Hoax Perpetuations**. People with unscrupulous motives can deceive an online support group. Hoaxes tend to occur because members are anonymous or lack an emotional commitment to the cybercommunity.

Future Directions

The quality and speed of computers and Internet technology steadily improves. For example, Internet software such as "OnLive Traveler", "The Palance" (The Palance, Inc., 1998) or "e-mail Voice Link" use microphones and speakers to communicate. With the addition of a video camera connected to the audio equipment, Video Teleconferencing (VTC) enables members to maintain visual and audio contact. Technological advances can make online support groups somewhat comparable to face-to-face support groups while avoiding the inconveniences associated with gathering at a specific location. However, some of the benefits of privacy and anonymity that members currently enjoy and find unique about online support would be compromised to various degrees. Finally, *"Internet time"* is a relatively new global concept of time that should facilitate the scheduling of online support groups across time zones (Lockridge, 1999). It transcends time zones and makes the time of day the same across all time zones.

Conclusion

Online support groups provide an alternative vehicle of support for people in distress by linking people with similar issues. They have the potential to improve the access and delivery of support to a wide range of people, including some who would not seek face-to-face support at all. Finally, they reduce the sense of isolation caused by geographic or physical/medical constraints and increase feelings of validation. However, they are not appropriate for everyone.

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